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Among the key men involved in the American Revolution and the following periods, we find an oft-repeated concern that may seem foreign to us today—the threat of standing armies. This was a heritage of British legal thought and history, and it became an underappreciated part of American political thought and experience.

Why were peacetime standing armies viewed as such a threat?

To many Americans of this period, peacetime standing armies posed a threat not only because they could be used by the state to overthrow liberty, but because they tended to reshape society and government itself. A permanent military establishment could develop interests distinct from those of the people, become an instrument for enforcing unpopular or unconstitutional policies, and concentrate power in the hands of central authorities.

Standing armies also required permanent taxation, debt, and bureaucracy, fostering what later historians would call a fiscal-military state. This process also creates vested interests. Once careers, contracts, pensions, and bureaucracies depend upon military expenditures, peace may no longer seem desirable by many. James Madison said,

> Of all the enemies of true liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other.
>
> War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. . . .
>
> No nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.

Moreover, standing armies threatened to erode the ideal of the citizen-soldier by replacing local militias defending their homes with professional soldiers whose loyalty was directed primarily toward the state (which paid them). In the minds of many revolutionaries, standing armies and expanding government power were mutually reinforcing, with war and military necessity often serving as the justification for greater centralization and political control.

It is the contention of this article that the Continental Congress's decision to appoint George Washington commander of the Continental Army and to pursue his state-centric military strategy, together with the extraordinary fiscal and political measures adopted to sustain that strategy—including inflationary finance, public debt, legal tender laws, price controls, confiscation, and other wartime expedients—

demonstrated the close relationship between war, standing armies, and the centralization of political power. We can observe a recurring historical pattern: war strengthens standing armies, standing armies require expanded state capacity, and expanded state capacity tends toward political centralization.

British-American Opposition to Standing Armies

Opposition to permanent, peacetime standing armies is a noble British-American tradition, largely based on historical experience, not just abstract political philosophy.

In William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*—the most influential summary of English common law available to the American founding generation—Blackstone acknowledged, "In a land of liberty it is extremely dangerous to make a distinct order of the profession of arms."

Samuel Adams—radical leader of the Sons of Liberty and Massachusetts delegate to the Continental Congress—wrote (January 7, 1776), "A standing Army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the People." Contextually, the Massachusetts delegation reluctantly accepted the state-centric approach to the war—with its inevitable buildup of a central state apparatus—when the Congress created the Continental Army on June 14, 1775 and appointed George Washington selected on June 15, 1775.

In *Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of Charles Lee*, Phillip Papas writes (p. 9)—after including the above quote from Samuel Adams—about Charles Lee's suspicion regarding standing armies and concerns with a state-centric approach to the war, "If he was out of step with Washington, Lee was not alone among the revolutionaries in his belief that professional standing armies posed a major threat to liberty."

The Virginia Declaration of Rights (section 13), which George Mason drafted in 1776, declared "that standing armies, in time of peace, should be avoided as dangerous to liberty; and that in all cases the military should be under strict subordination to, and governed by, the civil power."

The Declaration of Independence also mentioned standing armies as a central grievance against the British government and the king:

> He [George III] has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass [*sic*] our People, and eat out their substance.
>
> *He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislature.*
>
> He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

> He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:
>
> For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us: . . . (*emphasis* added)

The Declaration of Independence reveals that the American objection was not merely to the existence of a standing army, but to the use of military power during peacetime as an instrument of political rule. The grievances concerning standing armies, the military being made "independent of and superior to the Civil Power," and the quartering of troops are presented together because they were understood as parts of the same problem.

Americans feared that a peacetime army detached from local control could be used to enforce unpopular laws, override civil authority, and compel obedience through force. Quartered troops represented the physical presence of government power among the people, while standing armies provided the means by which objectionable policies could ultimately be enforced. Thus, the Declaration reflects a broader Whig and republican concern that liberty could be gradually undermined when military power became a permanent feature of government and was employed in domestic affairs rather than solely for defense against foreign enemies.

The broader British historical-legal context also provides further insight. According to Constitution Annotated: Analysis and Interpretation of the US Constitution, in a useful article entitled "The Early American Experience with Standing Armies,"

> Great Britain traditionally allowed its monarchs both to initiate wars and to raise and support armies; however, in the 17th century, Britain experienced three-quarters of a century of struggle over whether its army would be controlled by the Crown or the Parliament. In the 1628 Petition of Right, the English Parliament called on King Charles I to end the practice of dispersing great companies of soldiers and mariners throughout England. Charles I was eventually ousted from the throne, tried, and convicted of treason following the English Civil War, but the Crown again maintained a standing army after the monarchy was restored. In the Glorious Revolution of 1689, William and Mary agreed to the English Bill of Rights of 1689, which prohibited the Crown from raising or keeping a standing army in peacetime without Parliament's consent.

Given that context, we can see why Charles Lee and several others had concerns regarding standing armies, especially during peacetime. Phillip Papas explains Charles Lee's issues with pursuing a state-

centric model of warfare complete with a professional army (pp. 8-9),

> For Lee, then, the movement to create a professional army in America smacked dangerously of a European-style military establishment—one that was tied to absolute authority, monarchy, and European corruption and was at odds with the national character, liberties, and military traditions of the Americans. Lee warned that an army of professional soldiers who were paid by the state was invariably dangerous to liberty and civic virtue because it had the potential to become an instrument of tyranny should it come under the control of morally corrupt leaders concerned only with the protection of personal interests. He argued that the creation of a professional soldiery threatened the very essence of the American Revolution—that is, free citizens fighting for their natural rights and liberties and in defense of their families and their property. Professional armies were obedient to the interests of the state alone, not to the interests of the citizenry of a free society. He feared that a professional regular army could be turned against the Revolution and used for the suppression of the same natural rights and liberties that the war aimed to protect. (pp. 8-9)

While obviously not agreeing with the conclusion, Washington himself gave a nod to the potential downside of standing armies,

> Altho' a large standing Army in time of Peace hath ever been considered dangerous to the liberties of a Country, yet a few Troops, under certain circumstances, are not only safe, but indispensably necessary. Fortunately for us our relative situation requires but few. (emphasis in original)

While ultimately a step toward greater centralization, the Constitution too showed a concern regarding standing armies, especially in peacetime, "The Congress shall have Power. . . *To raise and support Armies*, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years; . . ." (*emphasis* added). Later, during the ratification debates, Edmund Randolph argued, "With respect to a standing army, I believe there was not a member in the federal Convention, who did not feel indignation at such an institution." Ultimately, the Congress was authorized by the Constitution to both raise and support a national army and to organize the militia.

The overlooked Third Amendment declared, "No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law." While this was clearly a response to the British practice of quartering soldiers among the Americans

in time of peace, it also subtly implies that—during peacetime—there might be allowances for a standing army.

The Newburgh Conspiracy (March 1783)

The Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783 revealed how statist aspects of the Revolution, especially how it was fought, had already fostered pressures toward greater nationalization and centralized power. Understandably frustrated by unpaid wages and pensions, officers in the Continental Army—encouraged by nationalist allies such as Robert Morris—considered using military pressure to secure stronger federal authority and reliable national revenues under threat of military force. The episode vindicated long-standing fears that standing armies could become political instruments threatening liberty and state sovereignty.

Although Washington ultimately defused the crisis and Congress rejected proposals for a peacetime standing army, the affair demonstrated how national military institutions could generate demands for greater consolidation of political power at the center.

Under the Articles of Confederation, the central government did not have the ability to tax the states directly. Largely due to the state-centric approach, a policy of inflation pursued by the Continental Congress and the states, legal tender laws, wage and price controls, and other statist interventions, the situation was the worst of both worlds—the Revolution incurred many of the costs normally

associated with centralized warfare without possessing the stable revenue necessary to sustain it. The resulting fiscal crisis not only contributed to the unrest at Newburgh but also furnished nationalists with powerful arguments for expanding the powers of the central government, especially the power to tax. Intervention begets intervention.

Papas sees the Newburgh event a vindication of the concerns of Charles Lee regarding the danger of standing armies and centralized military establishments (p. 9),

> [Lee] feared that a professional regular army could be turned against the Revolution and used for the suppression of the same natural rights and liberties that the war aimed to protect. The plot by several Continental Army officers at Newburgh, New York, in 1783 to challenge the Congress of the Confederation and wrest power away from the civilian authorities because of the government's alleged indifference to their financial problems proved that this was not the wild fantasy of an eccentric soldier.

Likewise, historian Jeffrey Rogers Hummel writes,

> The radicals' suspicion of standing armies stood fully vindicated, for never has the United States been closer to succumbing to an American Caesar. At this point, however, Washington, although firmly endorsing

> nationalist goals, balked. His personal intervention caused the Newburgh conspiracy to disband.

In his Newburgh Address (March 15, 1783), George Washington heroically pleaded with his men not to pursue this action, and he was ultimately successful, but we should appreciate how significant the risk was and how close America was to this fate. Thomas Jefferson said that the "virtue of a single character [Washington] has prevented this revolution from being closed as most others have been closed by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish." In the address itself, Washington said,

> . . .this dreadful alternative, of either deserting our Country in the extremest hour of her distress, or turning our Army against it, (which is the apparent object, unless Congress can be compelled into an instant compliance) has something so shocking in it, that humanity revolts at the idea.

Washington's Interpretation (May 1783)

What lessons did Washington draw from the Newburgh event?

Even though Washington recognized the common concerns about standing armies and centralized military establishments in the letter quoted above (May 1, 1783), Washington also concluded not that the army was too powerful, but that the national

government was too weak. That interpretation would help propel him toward support for constitutional consolidation.

Unlike Charles Lee, Washington seemed to believe the problem was not the state-centric approach and existence of a standing army, but rather its size, its unpaid condition, the weakness of civilian institutions, and failures of political leadership. Washington's interpretation of the Newburgh conspiracy led Washington to become a proponent of nationalization and consolidation rather than decentralization.

Washington's war strategy required a large Continental Army; large armies require enormous funding; the Continental Congress and the states funded the army largely through inflation and debt (with severe consequences and additional interventions); officers and soldiers went unpaid and the Newburgh conspiracy emerged; nationalists agitated for the conspiracy and used the conspiracy to agitate further for stronger national powers to collect revenue; and those arguments, along with George Washington's influence, led to the movement for the Constitution.

Nationalist reformers seized upon both the fiscal crisis and the military unrest as evidence that the Confederation government lacked sufficient authority to govern effectively. The result was a growing movement for stronger national powers of taxation and finance that ultimately contributed to the drive for constitutional reform. Out of the fifty-five men

present at the Philadelphia Convention, twenty-one delegates belonged to the militarist Society of the Cincinnati and the convention was dominated by the nationalist factions that the prior war had forged together: land speculators, ex-army officers, public creditors, and privileged merchants.

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